

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Middle East & N. Africa > Syria > History, society, culture (Syria) > **The tangled roots of the catastrophe - How was Syria turned into hell on earth?**

ANALYSIS

# **The tangled roots of the catastrophe - How was Syria turned into hell on earth?**

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**With the U.S. and Russia celebrating a “ceasefire” that helped the Assad dictatorship tighten its grip, Ashley Smith unravels the tangled roots of the catastrophe in Syria.**

THE U.S. and Russia celebrated the success of last weekend’s “cessation of hostilities” in Syria, purportedly organized so the United Nations (UN) could deliver humanitarian relief to besieged cities like Aleppo. The agreement didn’t include the al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which continued to exchange attacks with government troops, and the Russian forces backing them.

In the end, the brief respite in Russian air strikes actually allowed dictator Bashar al-Assad’s army, along with Iranian militias and Lebanon’s Hezbollah, to consolidate control over sections of Syria they had re-conquered.

Assad and Russia’s Vladimir Putin have justified their savage war by claiming that they are striking back against ISIS forces that control large parts of the east of the country. In reality, Assad and Putin have been waging a counterrevolutionary war against a resistance to the regime that first arose as part of the Arab Spring wave of pro-democracy rebellions. In the process, Syria has been plunged into a humanitarian catastrophe.

In a country of 22 million, some 470,000 people have been killed in the war so far, according to the Syrian Center for Policy Research, and the government and its foreign backers are responsible for 95 percent of civilian deaths.

More than 11 million people—half the population—have been driven from their homes. Seven million have fled to other parts of the country, another 4 million have crossed the borders to surrounding countries, and more than a million Syrians have journeyed across the Mediterranean in the hopes of finding refuge in Europe.

Russia’s military intervention last fall has destabilized European politics because of the effects of the refugee crisis—and enflamed conflicts between regional rivals in the Middle East, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Amid the spiraling crisis, the U.S. has been forced to shift its policy in Syria. It had been committed to an orderly transition that would get rid of Assad and incorporate handpicked figures from the rebel side into the existing state, which could then be bolstered in the war on ISIS.

Now, however, the U.S. seems ready to capitulate to Russia’s demand that Assad remain in power as the joint war on ISIS continues. It has already failed to challenge Russia’s intervention when it

plainly was directed toward helping the Syrian regime regain the initiative against rebel forces, not ISIS.

Unless something changes, this will be a geopolitical victory for Russian imperialism and Assad's counterrevolution against what remains of the Syrian Spring.

**THERE ARE** two central causes to this immense international crisis.

The first is the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. That set in motion the imperialist and regional conflicts that have come to a head in Syria.

The Bush administration's war on Iraq was designed to secure America's status as the world's only superpower. The Bush team wanted to conduct rolling regime changes across the Middle East; install puppet rulers in Iraq, Syria and Iran; and—with the region securely under America's thumb—manipulate energy supplies to control potential imperial rivals like China.

But the Bush Doctrine backfired. The U.S. suffered what Gen. William Odom called the "greatest strategic disaster in American history"—because of the resistance of Iraqis to occupation. Sunni and Shia Arabs rose up against U.S. forces.

To salvage the failing occupation, the U.S. turned to the classic trick of all empires—divide and rule. It pitted Kurds against Arabs, and Sunni Muslims against Shia Muslims. That triggered a devastating sectarian civil war, in which the U.S. backed the Shia-dominated Iraqi state—despite Shia ties to Washington's enemies in the Iranian government—against the Sunni resistance.

In this context, ISIS's progenitor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, emerged as a force among embattled Sunnis—it was notorious for launching unrelenting attacks on the Shia population and its religious sites.

Iraq, once one of the most economically advanced countries of the region, was already devastated by a decade of bombing and economic sanctions, but the civil war further unraveled the social fabric. The invasion and the sectarian war caused the deaths of well over 1 million Iraqis.

As a result of Bush's failed war in Iraq, the U.S. suffered a relative decline of its power against rivals China and Russia. To adjust to this new situation, Washington abandoned plans for regional regime change—Barack Obama, who posed as an antiwar candidate in the 2008 presidential election, became the face of a new strategy for U.S. imperialism.

Ironically, Iran emerged as the real victor of the Iraq War. It could now count the new Shia state in Iraq in its list of allies that included the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon—the so-called "Shia Crescent" sweeping from Tehran in the East, through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean.

To contain Iran's relative rise, the U.S. turned to its historic allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, which both see Iran as their principal rival in the region. Saudi Arabia used sectarianism to unite Sunni states in the region against the "Shia Crescent"—which prompted Iran and its axis, fearing isolation, to turn increasingly to Russia and China as superpower backers.

Obama adopted a new strategy of balancing between the Middle East's main powers in the hopes of defusing conflicts and stabilizing the region. The goal was to maintain America's alliances with Saudi Arabia and Israel, while developing a live-and-let-live arrangement with Iran.

But this strategy only intensified Middle Eastern and international rivalries. For example, when the U.S. struck its deal with Iran over its nuclear program, Saudi Arabia and Israel recoiled in anger.

The U.S. responded by inking enormous weapons deals with both countries, which only served to antagonize Iran. Tehran therefore doubled down on its relationship with Russia and China.

All of these geopolitical antagonisms have erupted in Syria. Russia, China and Iran have lined up with Assad, while the U.S., Turkey, and Saudi Arabia tried to use the resistance as a tool to get rid of the dictator, while preserving his state.

**BUT THESE** geopolitical conflicts wouldn't have emerged in Syria in the same form without the second cause of the crisis in the Middle East: the counterrevolution against the Arab Spring.

In 2011, students, workers and peasants rose up across North Africa and the Middle East against dictatorship and repression, as well as neoliberalism and class inequality. The rebellions, first in Tunisia, then Egypt, then spreading around the region, were fought for freedom, democracy and equality.

The wave of struggle swept away entrenched dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, but the rulers of other countries in the region, though shaken, managed to cling to power, and the Arab Spring lacked the political development to carry on further.

Three agents of counterrevolution intervened to preserve the existing order against the tide of revolt.

First, the imperialist powers turned against the uprisings. The U.S. had initially opposed the Arab Spring revolts. In Bahrain, it turned a blind eye when troops from neighboring Saudi Arabia intervened to brutally put down the revolt.

Only under duress did Washington abandon its opposition and call for "orderly transitions" in Tunisia and Egypt. Elsewhere, the U.S. tried to use a grassroots rebellion to get rid of its "frenemy" like Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya. But that turned into a disaster, with the country devolving into civil war—among the casualties were Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and staff at the U.S. embassy in Benghazi. This led the U.S. to renounce regime change in favor of stabilizing the existing order.

The U.S. wasn't the only imperialist power to back counterrevolution. Russia and China also have imperialist stakes in the region.

Russia possesses a naval base in Syria, alliances with Iran and the Assad regime, and investments in both countries. So, too, does China, which is especially eager to invest in the region's oil economy and curry alliances with oil-producing states, particularly ones outside the U.S. orbit, to ensure independent access to energy supplies. China and Russia have therefore backed Assad with money and armaments to suppress the Syrian revolution.

The second force of counterrevolution has been the region's ruling classes and their state machines. They have used brute force to crush revolts and stoked sectarian conflict to divide them. Thus, Saudi Arabia and Turkey backed various Islamist militias fighting against Assad in Syria. Iran has, in turn, backed the Houthi revolt against the Saudi-backed state in Yemen—Saudi Arabia has responded with a bombing campaign that is laying waste to the country.

The final counterrevolutionary force is ISIS. It emerged as a force in Iraq after the Shia-dominated state's suppression of mainly nonviolent demonstrations in Sunni areas in 2012. ISIS brought together personnel from Saddam Hussein's former regime with remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

In 2014, it carried out a stunning offensive across Sunni areas in western and northern Iraq,

conquering Mosul and other cities to proclaim its new caliphate. By and large Iraqi Sunnis do not support ISIS's reactionary politics and heavy-handed repression, but they do view it as a lesser evil compared to the brutal sectarian rule of the country's Shia state.

In Syria, ISIS was an embattled, unpopular and mainly foreign force. But once it seized Mosul in Iraq—and, with it, enormous amounts of money and arms—ISIS was strong enough to carve out territory in Syria.

It has not sought to engage in a frontal war with the Assad government. Instead, it has operated according to a de facto non-aggression pact with the regime, going so far as to trade oil with the Syrian regime. ISIS's military moves in Syria have mainly targeted anti-Assad rebels in areas liberated from the regime's control—with the aim of expanding the caliphate.

**IMPERIALISM AND** counterrevolution thus set the stage for the crisis that has erupted in Syria.

Assad's regime, like the others in the region, is an utterly corrupt capitalist dictatorship. In recent years, Bashar al-Assad has specialized in imposing neoliberal measures, privatizing sections of state capitalist industry for the benefit of cronies linked to his family. He commercialized agriculture, impoverishing peasants in the countryside, and dismantled the social safety net, pauperizing urban workers.

As a result, Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami report in their brilliant book *Burning Country*, "Inequality grew, until 50 percent of the country's wealth was concentrated in the hands of 5 percent of the population."

While nominally secular, Assad's regime is based in the country's Alawite minority, which is an offshoot of Shia Islam. Like other tyrants in the region, he has been adept at manipulating Syria's sectarian divisions, repeatedly posturing as the defender of the Alawite and Christian minorities against Sunni Islamists, who he portrays as a terrorist threat.

The regime has also manipulated the country's principal national division between Arabs and Kurds. It allowed the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), rebelling against the government in rival Turkey, to base itself in Syria. But the government eventually expelled the PKK in 1998, which enabled Turkey to capture and jail leader Abdullah Ocalan.

At the same time, it denied citizenship to some 250,000 Kurds living in Syria, banned their language and crushed an uprising in 2004. Nevertheless, the government did allow the formation of the PKK's sister party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria, at times cutting deals with it and at others repressing it.

Syria was a long-time ally of the USSR empire during the era of the Cold War. After the collapse of the USSR, despite its continued rhetorical anti-imperialism directed against the U.S., the Syrian regime supported U.S. imperialism's first Gulf War against Iraq in 1991. While Assad did oppose the second war on Iraq, he was happy to collaborate with the U.S. program of extraordinary rendition—in which U.S. authorities sent "war on terror" prisoners to black sites in Syria for interrogation and torture.

As former CIA agent Robert Baer quipped, "If you want a serious interrogation, you send a prisoner to Jordan. If you want them to be tortured, you send them to Syria."

Whatever his verbal posturing in support of Palestine, Assad certainly is no principled opponent of Israel.

In 1976, his father, Hafez al-Assad, waged war on the PLO in Lebanon and slaughtered Palestinians in the country's refugee camps. Both father and son refused to challenge Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights in southwestern Syria. And during the current counterrevolution, Bashar al-Assad laid siege to the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, cutting off food and water and precipitating a humanitarian disaster.

**THESE WERE** among the many grievances that drove Syrians to revolt against Assad in 2011.

Tens of thousands marched peacefully in cities throughout the country, especially in the Sunni provinces. The protests explicitly chanted slogans against sectarianism and ethnic chauvinism, like "One, one, one, the Syrian people are one"—and for nonviolence with "Selmiyyeh, selmiyyeh," or "Peaceful, peaceful."

Just like other regimes in the region, Assad attempted to crush the revolt. He deployed his police and paramilitary thugs, the shabiha, to attack, beat, jail and torture thousands of activists.

To justify this brute display of repression, and with the hopes of maintaining some base of support, the government claimed that the demonstrators were agents of foreign powers and Islamist sectarians who would attack the Alawite and Christian minorities.

To make this threat more credible, Assad released 1,500 Sunni Salafists from his jails. They organized as many as 12 sectarian groups that targeted religious minorities and their places of worship. The vicious cycle continued—Assad was able to paint the entire revolt as sectarian, and bind the Alawite and Christian minorities to the regime.

The government also attempted to keep the Kurds from joining the revolt. He granted citizenship to 250,000 Kurds and withdrew his forces from the Kurdish north, effectively ceding control of the area to the PYD and its militia, the People's Protection Unit (YPG). Because of the history of Arab prejudice against Kurds and its own peculiar form of nationalist politics, the PYD kept its distance from the predominantly Sunni Arab revolutionaries. It attempted to carve out a Kurdish autonomous zone, Rojava, in Syria's north.

Threatened by the state's savage counterrevolution, Syrian revolutionaries had no choice but to take up arms in self-defense. They formed an estimated 1,000 militias, won over the Sunni rank and file within the Syrian military, and forged the Free Syrian Army, which numbered over 150,000 fighters. It progressively liberated cities and territory from Assad's crumbling regime.

Assad retreated to predominantly Alawite strongholds among Syria's coastal cities. In the liberated areas, revolutionaries built a network of local councils called Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) that organized the struggle and attempted to replace services previously provided by the government.

With his regime collapsing, Assad turned to rule-or-ruin tactics. His air force bombed cities and dropped chemical weapons on civilians, laying waste to whole sections of the country.

**AMID THIS** catastrophic situation, various Islamist forces emerged within the revolution. Some were accepted as part of it; some competed with the LCCs and the FSA from outside, but still fought the regime; and others, like the al Qaeda franchise, the al-Nusra Front, sometimes came into conflict with the FSA while also clashing with the regime.

The U.S., Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar funded the FSA. But they never supported the revolution.

The U.S. never provided the heavy weaponry, like anti-aircraft MANPADs, that the FSA fighters

needed to defend their cities against Assad's air force. When Assad dropped chemical weapons on a suburb of Damascus in 2013, pressure built on the U.S. to intervene against Assad. But Obama balked, instead agreeing to a Russian deal to save the regime, on the condition that it destroy its chemical weapons stockpile.

In reality, the U.S. and its allies hoped to co-opt the revolution's representatives organized, first, in the Syrian National Council, and later, in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The U.S. wanted to use these bodies to put pressure on Assad to step down, and then broker a deal that incorporated sections of the rebel leadership it could rely on into the existing state.

Regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar provided limited support to some Islamist forces, prompting many militias to rebrand themselves Islamist in order to procure desperately needed funds and arms. At the same time, the desperation of the conditions in Syria drove many to find succor in religion to alleviate their suffering. Thus, sections of the revolution increasingly gravitated to Islamist forces.

ISIS was the most extreme and counterrevolutionary expression of this dynamic, though it continued to concentrate its fire on anti-Assad opposition groups rather than government forces.

After its victory in Iraq, ISIS established itself as a power in Syria. Assad took advantage of its emergence to package his counterrevolution as a "war on terror" against ISIS. But other rebel forces were the overwhelming targets of the slaughter carried out by government forces—later even more effectively with support from Russian warplanes.

**SINCE THE** rise of ISIS—and especially after the terrorist attacks it orchestrated last year in Paris and elsewhere—all the imperial and regional powers have intensified their intervention in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. has built an international coalition forged around NATO, but encompassing 66 countries in total, with the stated aim of degrading and eventually destroying ISIS.

Obama's new war has only deepened the crisis in Syria and the region. It has blown up more of the country, exacerbated the refugee crisis, and increased recruitment to ISIS. It will undoubtedly trigger more blowback, as ISIS retreats to terrorist tactics in the region and internationally.

The U.S. wants to avoid a protracted ground war against ISIS. Instead, Washington aims to provide air support for proxy forces on the ground overseen by military advisers and Special Forces. In Iraq, the Pentagon hopes to bolster the existing Iraqi government by getting it to incorporate the Sunni elite, integrate Sunnis into the Iraqi Army and turn its united forces against ISIS.

Washington's hope is that with American air cover, the Iraqi Army, in conjunction with the Kurdish Regional Government's Peshmerga, will be able to defeat ISIS. While this strategy was successful in the re-conquest of the city of Ramadi, ISIS was clearly willing to give it up without much of a fight, preferring instead to retreat to its stronghold in Mosul.

In Syria, the U.S. has escalated its air strikes against ISIS targets, but has found it difficult to secure proxy forces on the ground. A U.S. training program designed to field a fighting force against ISIS failed, largely because Syrians who might have taken part didn't want to be proxies against ISIS, but instead fight to overthrow the regime. The program, which recruited and graduated a total of 60 people, was wrapped up last year.

Instead, the U.S. has struck a de facto cooperation pact with Assad. In 2014, the Obama administration had established backchannel contacts with Assad to ensure that it could use Syrian airspace for its bombing runs. It also forged an alliance with the PYD and YPG. When the U.S. finally

did expand its air strikes into Syria, its warplanes struck not only ISIS, but also the al-Nusra Front, which many Syrian Sunnis tolerate because it defends them from the regime.

Sunnis in Syria perceive this de facto alliance between the U.S. and the regime as a betrayal of the revolution. Out of despair, some are beginning to join ISIS for the same reason that Iraqi Sunnis see it as a “lesser evil”—however brutal and reactionary, it is an alternative to violence and death at the hands of the state.

In short, this is how Obama’s intervention into Syria has bolstered the appeal of ISIS.

**LATE LAST** year, Russian imperialism took advantage of America’s weakened position to intervene directly in Syria, and explicitly in support of the regime.

The Russian air force has backed up ground operations by government troops, Iran’s militias and Hezbollah, as part of a counterrevolutionary war to retake the country’s liberated areas. While it proclaimed that it was targeting ISIS, Russia has directed 80 percent of its strikes against rebel forces.

“With its massive military involvement on the side of a client minority regime, Iran is to Syria what the United States once was to Vietnam,” write Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami in *Burning Country*. “And Russia—providing weapons, deflecting sanctions, shielding from blame—is to Syria what the United States is to Israel.”

Russia hopes to force the U.S. to accept Assad’s regime as an ally in the grand coalition against ISIS. Just like the U.S., Russia’s air force has supported the PYD, YPG and its broader umbrella fighting force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), nominally to fight ISIS.

But the Kurdish forces have also attacked rebel fighters and imposed their rule on Arab areas in an effort to enlarge the Kurdish autonomous zone. Tragically, this has broken the potential unity between the Kurdish struggle and the Syrian revolution.

The PYD’s calculation is that it can win liberation for Syrian Kurds with this strategy. More likely, the imperial powers will merely use and betray the PYD—as they have exploited and manipulated the legitimate Kurdish struggle for self-determination in other countries, like Iraq.

The bottom line is that Russia supports Assad, who is no friend of the Kurdish people—and the U.S. wants to maintain the territorial integrity of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, which entails Kurds giving up their right to national self-determination.

Russia’s atrocities could eventually rival those that the U.S. committed in Iraq over the long run. The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 679 civilians killed in January alone—94 of them children and 73 women—as a result of Russian air strikes.

The UN Commission of Inquiry has accused the regime of the “deliberate destruction of health care infrastructure” and using starvation as a weapon of war. Doctors Without Borders reports that Russia and the regime have attacked its 67 hospitals with 94 air strikes, completely destroying 12 facilities and killing 23 of its staff.

Russia’s intervention in Syria has enflamed America’s allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey, which launched a campaign of state terror against Kurds and the PKK within its borders, has objected to Russia’s intervention, as well as American support for the PYD. It classifies the PYD in Syria as a terrorist group and views the formation of a Kurdish autonomous zone along its border

with Syria as a national security threat.

Earlier this year, Turkey shot down a Russian jet in contested territory along its border with Syria. It is carrying out cross-border artillery and air strikes on PYD and YPG positions. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went so far as to demand that the U.S. choose between supporting Turkey and supporting the PYD.

Saudi Arabia is also protesting Russia's intervention and Washington's retreat from its insistence that Assad must go, which it views as another American concession to Iran. That's what is behind the threats to send Saudi weaponry to Turkey and launch a ground invasion of Syria with Saudi forces. This is justified as a war against ISIS, but it's really a threat to stop the advance of Assad and his allies.

Russia's air war has driven untold numbers out of besieged cities like Aleppo, with many desperate to escape to Europe. The hostility to refugees in European Union countries has taken a further ominous turn, with states like Macedonia and Hungary starting to close their borders.

**AND SO**—outfoxed by Russian imperialism, worried about the growing consequences of the flood of refugees to Europe, and scrambling to maintain some leverage in the region—the U.S. government seems to be shifting its strategy in Syria in the run-up to the so-called peace negotiations set for Geneva, Switzerland, on March 7.

The U.S. has accepted Assad's participation in the "peace" process in order to continue with its priority of fighting ISIS. It is apparently willing to postpone a transition to a post-Assad regime until an uncertain date in the future.

This is exactly what a whole wing of the U.S. ruling establishment, led by Henry Kissinger and the right-wing National Review has been advocating for some time. Now, liberal Stephen Kinzer has joined the chorus with a shockingly pro-Assad op-ed article titled "On Syria: Thank You, Russia," Kinzer argues in support of "Russia's strategy—fight ISIS and al-Qaeda, defend Assad and seek a ceasefire that preserves his regime in some form."

This Western advocacy on behalf of a dictator, combined with Russia's military intervention, has paid off. UN mediator Steffan de Mistura recently declared, "President Assad is part of the solution."

For his part, Secretary of State John Kerry—who long ago abandoned Assad's removal as a precondition for any political settlement—now states that the U.S. and Russian views on Syria "are fundamentally very similar," and that the replacement of Assad would come at the end of a long "transition government."

If the U.S. can get the Syrian revolution's representatives to agree to Assad's continued rule, it would be the diplomatic consolidation of his counterrevolution. But such a deal would never be accepted by the majority of Syrian Sunnis, who rightly look upon Assad as a mass murderer.

To terrify various sides into accepting what's on the table, however, John Kerry floated an alternative: his "Plan B" for the partition of the country into Kurdish, Sunni and Alawite states. This would not only trigger mass ethnic cleansing in Syria, but it would destabilize the entire region. Turkey, for instance, would certainly oppose any plan that set up a new Kurdish state led by the PYD, since that would encourage Turkish Kurds to secede and join it.

In reality, neither Plan A nor Plan B is likely to succeed. Therefore, the U.S., NATO and Russia may try to organize a neocolonial occupation of Syria to crush ISIS and impose order amid the chaos engulfing Syria and the whole region.



All of this proves that the imperialist and regional powers offer no solution to the mess that their interventions and counterrevolution have caused. They are all committed to preserving a rotten system that the people of the Middle East and North Africa revolted against in 2011.

The only lasting solution is to get all of the foreign powers out of Syria and Iraq, especially the U.S., but also Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The borders of all the countries of the region, of Europe and beyond should be opened to the fleeing victims of the slaughter.

But in reality, the only hope for Syria lies in the recovery of the struggle from below—for democracy and freedom for all those living under tyrannies; for national self-determination of oppressed people like the Palestinian and Kurds; and for the self-emancipation of the region's laboring masses. That will require a radical left alternative, rooted in working-class organization, which stands for unity against national, sectarian and ethnic prejudices and divisions.

**Ashley Smith**

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\* Socialist Worker. March 1, 2016:

<https://socialistworker.org/2016/03/01/how-was-syria-turned-into-hell-on-earth>